K A N S A S

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Q Fever Q&A

What is Q fever?

Q fever is an animal-borne disease that can infect farm animals (primarily goats, sheep and cows) as well as pets such as cats, dogs, rodents, and some birds. The disease is transmitted by the bacterium *Coxiella burnetti.* The highest concentration of the bacterium occurs in the placental tissues of animals.

How is Q fever spread?

The disease is spread through the inhalation of aerosolized particles from the tissues, fluids, or excreta of infected animals or from direct contact with contaminated materials; handling of fetal tissue or products of conception puts animal workers at high risk for infection. Clothing which may become contaminated through working with animals is also believed to be a possible source of infection.

While Q fever is very infectious from animals to the humans, it is not spread from person to person. Only persons who work closely with animals or animal tissues ordinarily need be concerned about being at risk for Q fever.

What are the symptoms?

The incubation period for Q fever is generally between 2-3 weeks but may range anywhere from 9-39 days. Early symptoms include the sudden onset of fever, chills, headache, weakness, lethargy, loss of appetite and profuse sweating.

Pneumonia occurs in about half of Q fever cases, but may develop without the usual accompanying respiratory symptoms such as cough and chest pain. Abnormal liver function and acute or chronic hepatitis may also occur. In rare cases, neurological symptoms may also be present. Pregnant women who acquire Q fever are at higher risk for fetal infection and miscarriage.

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Is Q fever fatal?

Most cases of acute Q fever (no long-term symptoms) resolve without treatment. Death from Q fever occurs in about 1 percent of untreated cases. It is rare for someone who is undergoing treatment for acute Q fever to die from the disease.

Death can occur in up to 60 percent of chronic Q fever cases (where long-term health complications arise). Antibiotic therapies are recommended for chronic cases of Q fever.

How can Q fever be prevented?

Persons working in jobs that could place them in close contact with animal tissues – such as veterinarians, farmers, laboratory or slaughterhouse workers – should wash or shower thoroughly after working with animals. Clothing should be handled and laundered so as to prevent aerosolization and potential transmission. It should be noted that *Coxiella burnetti* is highly resistant to heat and many disinfectants.

An investigational vaccine is available to persons whose jobs put them at increased risk for Q fever, but no vaccine exists for the general public. The risk of harmful side effects from the vaccine is greater than the risk of Q fever for most people. A skin sensitivity test should be given before the decision is made to administer the vaccine.